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December 8, 2005

Ms. Amy Cameron
California Department of Education
1430 N Street
Sacramento, CA 95814-5901

Dear Ms. Cameron:

I am writing to propose two alternatives to the CAHSEE, each of which would be contingent on the students' having completed all requirements for graduation with an agreed-upon minimum GPA. I request that these suggestions be added to the public input provided at the December 15th meeting in Sacramento.

The strengths and weaknesses of the students who have not yet satisfied the CAHSEE requirement vary tremendously. Some students may not have the basic skills being tested, while others may be unable to demonstrate their skills on a narrowly drawn, one-day test because of obstacles such as a high anxiety level. The two alternatives described below will, I think, enable these students to "demonstrate their competency . . . at the same level of rigor as the CAHSEE" while circumventing some of the obstacles they face.

An alternative for students who have failed either the math or ELA section of the CAHSEE would be to give these students a provisional high school diploma that requires them to take remedial courses targeted specifically to their needs. They could take these courses in a community college or in a program specifically designed to serve as a bridge between secondary and post-secondary institutions. These programs would be approved by the state and the provisional diploma would become permanent upon their completion. The advantage of this approach is that it would provide remediation while assuring that the students' needs are met instead of making it impossible for them to get a high school diploma. The disadvantage of this approach is that it would require the establishment of a new administrative structure to ensure that the remedial programs actually meet the students' needs.

An alternative for students who have failed only the ELA section of the CAHSEE would be to have these students initiate and complete a senior project. The project could focus on a topic of the student's choice. It would require research using multiple types of sources such as books, articles, films, videos, and interviews. It could culminate in a position paper in which the student takes a position and defends it, a reflection paper in which the student reflects upon what s/he has learned and how s/he has learned it, an oral

presentation, and, if appropriate, an exhibit of the student's work. The advantage of this approach is that its open-endedness would make it possible to address the needs of an extremely diverse student population. The disadvantage is that it is very labor intensive for the school. Each student would have to have a mentor teacher, and a committee of teachers would have to be available to read the final product and attend any presentations or exhibitions. Some schools, however, already require a similarly structured senior project. In these cases, any additional work at the school level would be minimal, though the Department of Education might wish to ensure that the project requirements meet certain minimum standards. If a school does not already require a senior project, it might consider putting this requirement in place for all students because a senior project is a better indication of competence than a narrowly drawn, one-day test.

If a decision is made to implement one or both of the alternatives described above, care will have to be taken to clearly describe all requirements and establish an administrative structure to oversee implementation. This takes time. But the approximately 100,000 seniors who have failed one or both sections of the CAHSEE and completed all their graduation requirements do not have time. I therefore urge you to grant these students their high school diplomas and to immediately begin to explore and plan for the implementation of the alternatives described above.

Sincerely yours,

Jane Schoenfeld